

On Being Valiant for Truth

[Daniel E. Wray](#)

Readers of *Pilgrim's Progress* will remember that Great-Heart and his companions met Valiant-for-Truth ' . . . just at the place where Little-faith formerly was robbed'. There he stood 'with his sword drawn, and his face all bloody'. This noble Christian had fought hard and endured much for the truth of the Gospel. Like a true soldier [I *Tim* 1.18; II *Tim* 4.7, 8), he persevered unto the end. Thus, among his last words before passing over to receive his 'crown of righteousness' were these: ' . . . now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me, that I have fought his battles, who will now be my rewarder . . . as he went, he said, "Death, where is thy sting?" And as he went down deeper, he said, "Grave, where is thy victory?" So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.'

Since it is through the truth that Believers are sanctified [*Jn* 17.17], and it is for not receiving the 'love of the truth' that men perish [II *Thess* 2.10], one would hope that all Christians would be valiant for the truth. Yet it seems that every age must bemoan the dearth of warriors who will 'earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints' [*Jude* 3]. The Holy Spirit exhorts us to 'Buy the truth, and sell it not . . .' [*Prov* 23.23]. Christians in general are told that they should '... stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel' [*Phil* 1.27]. An elder in particular must be 'Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.' [*Titus* 1.9].

We should not imagine that this work is only for the verbally gifted brethren. History has proved Thomas Manton's observation that: 'The disputations of the doctors do not commend it (i.e. truth) to the world so much as the death of the martyrs; and therefore, though you cannot dispute for the truth, yet you should die for the truth . . .' Nevertheless, while most Christians are not called to martyrdom for the truth, all are called to live the truth and defend it as God gives opportunity and ability. Thus since 'we wrestle not against flesh and blood . . .' [*Eph* 6.12], we do well to make every preparation possible to contend well. 'And if a man also strive (or "contend"), for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully' [II *Tim* 2.5]. 'It is the duty and wisdom of Christians to observe directions for their spiritual conflict. Who contends with a potent adversary

without considering how to encounter him?’ (William Jenkyn). Let the sincere Christian soldier, then, give consideration to the following pointers.

1. ‘Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing (or “handling”) the word of truth’ [II *Tim* 2.15]. Stick close to the Word of God and exercise great care to respect Scripture at all times. This means that we must labour to learn and use sound principles of interpretation. We must never give the impression that we prize winning an argument more than correctly understanding God’s Word. If we do give such an impression we can expect to be disregarded by sincere men, and that with good reason. Under some circumstances, the defender of truth may find his cause aided by the judicious use of creeds and good books. When these are consistent with Scripture, they ought to be used, but the wise warrior will note that some men are more offended than helped by such aids; that is, until they gain the wisdom to understand that the Holy Spirit has spoken to other generations besides their own.

If we depart from Scripture, usefulness will depart from us. Worse yet, we may do positive and long-lasting harm; for (as Manton observed) ‘We have all a heretic in our bosoms, and are by nature prepared to drink in all kinds of errors and lies, and therefore we are said, Psalm 58.3, to “speak lies from the womb”, because these things are in our natures’. He adds, ‘If you be not careful you may sin after you are dead; our errors and evil practices being continued and kept afoot by posterity.’

2. We are called to contend for the faith, not to be contentious for the faith. Biblical warnings against contentions and strife are also part of the truth [e.g. *Prov* 16.28, 26.21; *Titus* 3.9], and thus must be taken into careful consideration as the warrior for the truth considers how to conduct his campaigns. Here a godly man will keep on asking for wisdom [*Jm* 1.5, *Mt* 7.7]. He who sees no need for Divine wisdom here ought to withdraw until he knows himself better. It is an unusual man who can maintain a proper zeal which neither grows cold nor hot-headed. There is much need for properly discerning the relative weight and importance of issues. The whole counsel of God should be defended. We ought not to think that God has revealed anything in His Word which is superfluous. With this point clearly established, however, we can appreciate these wise counsels from Thomas Manton:

All this is not spoken to justify undue rigours, such as are without any temper of Christian moderation, or those frivolous controversies about trifles, such as have no foundation in the Word; as about the observance of Easter between the eastern and western churches, which differences grew so high that they excommunicated each other; or about celebrating the Lord’s Supper with leavened bread; . . . nor to justify mere verbal strifes about ‘words and names’, forbidden by the apostle [II *Tim* 2.14; I *Tim* 6.4]. Vain-glorious men, if they can get but a different method of expression, cry, No new light, and so there is a

great deal of noise stirred up about a mistake. Nor to justify the breaking of church fellowship and communion, and making rents in the body of Christ, because of difference of opinion in smaller matters, when we agree in the more weighty things. We are to 'walk together as far as we are agreed', [*Phil* 3.16]; and externals wherein we differ, lying far from the heart of religion, are nothing to faith and the new creature, wherein we agree [*Gal* 5.6, and 6.15]. The most weight should be pitched upon the fundamentals and essentials of religion; and when there is an agreement there, private differences in smaller matters should not make us break off from one another. False zeal is unevenly carried out to these lower things, both in opinion and practice; and usually young professors are eager upon disputes, impatient of contradiction, and lay out all their strength this way, to excuse their care in the more weighty matters of Christianity; whereas 'the kingdom of God doth not stand in meat and drink, but in peace and righteousness and joy in the Holy Ghost' [*Rom* 14.17]. The itch of disputing and zeal for an opinion, rather than religion in the main, are bad characters. Again, when men, though in the right, think there is no religion or holiness but within the compass of such an opinion, this is censorious rigour . . . or when a lesser dissent is loaded with all the odious consequences that you can fancy in your thoughts, though disclaimed by the party dissenting . . . when men upon every small occasion draw all things to extremity, and break out into contumely, revilings, persecution, biting and devouring one another, it is not zeal, but fierceness and brutish immoderation. Therefore, all this excepted, it standeth us upon to be zealous even to sufferings for the lesser truths, that we may prevent the further encroachments of Satan . . . (*Manton's Complete Works*, Vol. V, pp 117-18).

Manton also notes that ' . . . there are heretical manners as well as heretical doctrines'. 'The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth' [*Tim* 2.24, 25]. 'Soft words and strong arguments are good companions' (Jenkyn).

3. We ought not to quibble over words. Words are necessary tools, but we should beware of letting them become barriers. We are not contending for party shibboleths, but for the substance of biblical truth. This is closely related to the previous point and requires equal discernment. Calvin had much experience with such problems. Commenting on II Timothy 2.14, he wrote: 'The sole aim of a good teacher must be edification and he should give it his whole attention. On the negative side he enjoins him not only to avoid profitless questions himself but to prevent others from being led away by them. *Logomachein* means to be earnestly engaged in contentious disputations and it usually springs from a desire to be clever . . . He condemns *logomachia* on two scores, because it is fruitless and because it does great harm by disturbing men who are weak in the faith . . . Let us notice first that teaching is rightly condemned on the sole ground that it does no good. God's purpose is not to pander to our inquisitiveness but to give us profitable instruction. Away with all speculations that produce no

edification! But the second reason is much worse, when questions are raised that are not only fruitless but tend “to the subverting of them that hear”. I wish that this could be taken to heart by those who are always looking for wordy battles, searching out a quarrel in every question and quibbling over single words or syllables’. Calvin knew from personal experience the vexatious nature of word battles. His own debates over how to formulate the doctrine of Trinity are a case in point. Referring to this issue, he wrote: ‘And this modesty of saintly men ought to warn us against forthwith so severely taking to task, like censors, those who do not wish to swear to the words conceived by us, provided they are not doing it out of either arrogance or forwardness or malicious craft. But let these very persons, in turn, weigh the necessity that compels us to speak thus, that gradually they may at length become accustomed to a useful manner of speaking . . . But I have long since and repeatedly been experiencing that all who persistently quarrel over words nurse a secret poison. As a consequence, it is more expedient to challenge them deliberately than speak more obscurely to please them’ [*Inst I/XIII/5*].

4. We ought to be as concerned about the heart applications of truth as we are about its proper statement and defence. It is not right for the Christian labourer to give the impression that simple subscription to his definitions of doctrinal points is all that he is working to obtain. It is of no lasting value simply to mouth definitions while being devoid of the necessary heart-attachment to the truth. If this is kept in mind there will be little danger of useless quibbling over words, or of focusing undue attention on secondary matters. ‘Some truths have a more immediate, direct, and effectual tendency to the promotion of godliness and gospel obedience than others . . . That there is, by all that walk with God, great weight to be laid on those doctrines of truth which directly and effectually tend to the promotion of faith, love, fear, reverence of God, with universal holiness in their hearts and ways; this being that whereunto they are called, and whereby God is glorified, Jesus Christ and the gospel exalted, wherein his kingdom in them consists, on which their own peace in their own bosoms, their usefulness unto others in this world, their being made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light, do much depend.’ (Owen, *Works*, Vol. XI, p 382).

The knowledge of the truth is lifeless and useless if it does not lead us to communion with God and godliness. Owen spoke as a representative of all sound Pastors when he wrote: ‘Hence, oft-times, none are more estranged from the life of God than such as have much notional knowledge of the doctrines of the Scripture. For they are all of them useless, and subject to be abused, if they are not improved to form Christ in the soul, and transform the whole person into his likeness and image.’ (Vol. I, p. 84).

We thus ought to hate our own deficiencies in practical godliness at least as much as we hate doctrinal errors in others. For example, pride is a work of the flesh which is regrettably common in theological controversies. The man of God must be concerned that his love be not smothered by pride [*I Cor 13.4, 5*]. Mental

errors are not all that are 'contrary to sound doctrine' [I *Tim* 1.10]. The context of this last reference is ethical, therefore if our concept of 'doctrine' is biblical, it will include 'what duty God requires of man' as well as 'what man is to believe concerning God' (Shorter Catechism, Q. 3). The servant of Christ Jesus will honour his Lord in battle if he practises humility and patience [II *Tim* 2.24-26]. 'To preach and write for the truth doth not honour it so much as to "walk in the truth"', III John 4; and the life is a better witness of the reality of religion than the tongue' (Manton). Neither let us be turned from such godly virtues by the realization that some misconstrue patience as fear, and meekness as weakness. We ought to please God in these matters rather than men.

5. Let us labour to represent our opponents in controversy accurately. The man who is not valiant in truthfully representing his opponents reveals some insincerity as a defender of truth. For how can a man call himself a defender of God's truth when he is not being truthful himself about his neighbour's views. It is written of Dabney that in teaching, 'It was part of his plan, in the treatment of a topic, to state the objections to his thesis in the strongest possible manner' (*The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney*, p 554). In other words, he gave opposing views full credit and fair representation before seeking to expose their falsehood. This principle of fairness is also characteristic of William Cunningham's writings. (See for example his discussion of the extent of the atonement in *Historical Theology*, Vol. II, pp 324-25). A man who is secure in his understanding of the truth should have no fear of representing the views of others honestly. The truth will not be harmed, and others may be won more by our integrity than by our arguments.

Not only should we represent their positions fairly but also their persons. 'We ought promptly and cheerfully to admit any good or any appearance of good in others, even when they and we widely differ even in fundamentals. Paul has set us the example. Augustine followed it, admitting the good repute of Pelagius. It is always well to remember that the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. The cause of truth is never a gainer by our bad manners, nor by our bad tempers' (William Plumer in his commentary on Romans 10.2).

6. Let us be careful not to judge other men's consciences, nor to impute to them impure motives which they deny. It is all too easy for the controversialist to slip from contending for truth into suggesting that their opponent must be defiled in conscience. Whether he is or not is for another Judge to determine. 'There is still a further appearance of great carnality in such cases, when any do adventure to judge of the consciences and states of them whom they oppose, or from whom they differ: when they ascend the tribunal, usurp the throne, pass sentence upon them, as men of no conscience, or of no sincerity, or uprightness of heart with God. As if theirs were to be the universal conscience, the measure of all consciences; and he that cannot be governed by their conscience must have none at all; or he be stark blind towards truth, towards God, and towards himself, that sees not every thing they see, or fancy themselves to see' (John Howe).

It is indeed frustrating to find men failing to see and understand what is clear to us. The remedy for this impasse is to labour more in prayer and persuasion — humbly re-examining our own position. To make ourselves a governor over another man's conscience [cf. *Rom 14*] not only fails to contribute to a solution, but it turns what might have been lawful discussion into plain sin.

7. Let us not neglect to recognize and plainly acknowledge the significant areas of agreement which might co-exist with the areas of dissent. There is a difference between contending with an open enemy of the Gospel, and contending with a brother whose errors may be very grievous in our sight. Those who are 'holding the Head' will 'increase with the increase of God' [*Col 2.19*] because 'He who has begun the good work in them will perfect it' [*Phil 1.6*]. It is easier to contend rightly with a brother if we never allow ourselves to forget that he is bought with the same price as we are.

Sometimes a calm discussion between Believers will prove that there is more agreement than was at first thought. Such pleasant unity, if it concerns the fundamental doctrine of the faith, should be an occasion of joy even in the midst of the sad differences. We should rejoice if we know that the one with whom we contend is 'of God', when we contemplate that 'the whole world lieth in wickedness' [*1 John 5.19*].

8. There are the sad times when we encounter those thoroughly factious persons who must eventually be rejected [*Titus 3.10*]. With such persons, no amount of care and skill will prevent a trying battle. These are the ones who say they strive for truth, when their conduct makes it plain that they care more for the strife. The only end of their contentions is to 'have all destroyed that are not of their minds: and then (as the Roman historian speaks) . . . "when they have made a desolation, (so that they themselves are left alone in the world), that they will call peace"' (John Howe). In such cases as these, the defender of truth needs the wisdom of Solomon: 'Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit' [*Prov 26.4, 5*, see Bridges' commentary in *loco*]. The application of such wisdom to each particular situation requires the anointing from on High [cf. *1 John 2.27*], which is to be prayerfully sought. This point is brought up in order to comfort the man of God who has been bloodied in such encounters, and has come away feeling miserable over his own mistakes and his apparent lack of success. 'Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord' [*1 Cor 15.58*].

9. Finally, let us not forget the consequences of our contentions upon the lives of weaker brethren. Commenting on this, John Howe wrote:

I have found in my own conversation, that some even in distress, in agonies, have said, 'Lord, be merciful to us, I know not which way to go; one preaches

one thing, another preaches the quite contrary'. I know they mistake; we do generally in substance preach the same gospel. Thanks be to God, his gospel is not confined to a few men, or to this or that party of men. But in the meantime, it is a thing of very ill consequence to lay stumbling-blocks before the blind, bars and obstructions in the way of the weak and the lame, whereby they may be turned out of the way who should rather be strengthened.

It is essential that the servant of the Lord be able to refute those who oppose the Gospel; but it is also essential that by wholesome doctrine he be able to exhort [*Titus* 1.9]. He who is not chiefly skilled in feeding the flock of God will not likely be effective in contending with grievous wolves [*Acts* 20.28-30].

'But ye beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life' [*Jude* 20, 21].

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), please select this [link](#).